R.O.D

READ OR DIE

YOMIKO READMAN™ THE PAPER™

スーパーダッシュ

倉田英之
スタジオオルフェ
イラスト／羽音たらく

R.O.D
READ OR DIE
YOMIKO READMAN "THE PAPER"
スーパーダッシュ
倉田英之
スタジオオルフェ
イラスト／羽音たらく

Read or Die - Volume 01 Chapter 00-01 (Incomplete)

Table of Contents

1. Novel Illustrations
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1 - The Two Sensei

Novel Illustrations

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 1

-

  Front cover & insert

-

  Back cover & insert

-

  Color Illustration 1

-

  Color Illustration

2

-

Color Illustration 3

-

Content page

-

Page 027

-

Page 041

-

Page 063

-

Page 081

-

Page 101

-

Page 117

-

Page 165

-

Page 178-179

-

Page 201

-

Page 207

-

Page 227

Page 228

Prologue

Prologue[edit]

I love books; I love them more than life itself.

As you turn the pages, the sweet smell of ink floats into the air. The techniques of printing, ever improving through trial and error, truly comprise an art form. The pure white page is the stage, across which characters beautifully dance. In the weaving of those elements, lies innumerable tales.

Wisdom, ambition, sadness, joy, malice, grief, amazement - all the emotions which blaze within the human soul may be recorded on a page.

Nestled in a sheaf of paper sleeps an infinity beyond the limits of the universe. Just by opening a single page, we may fly into that infinity.

A happiness which enfolds the heart may bring us to tears. In our intoxication, we abandon our physical reality, unable to tear our eyes from the page.

By this alone may I divorce myself from this world, and set myself adrift in that of paper and ink...

I love books. I truly do.

"There's something I don't like about this building," spat Woo as he exited the car. His frame, wrapped in a J. Phillips suit, was small, but the suit stretched over him as if it were made of taut rubber. From the breast-pocket of his jacket peeked the head of a snake, to the surprise of any onlookers. Upon closer inspection, however, it would become clear that the snake was, in fact, a clever imitation.

Lu could tell that his brother was in a bad mood.

"Fuuuu..." Lu's only response was an extended sigh.

Every part of him, from his hands and fingers to his face and neck, was as wide and large as his sigh was long. While he was wearing a suit which matched Woo's in general appearance, the size of his suit was far greater than any other had to be. The two were like an "odd couple" from an old comedy movie, and Woo knew from Lu's sigh, that he, too, found the building suspicious.

"It feels like a tomb. Not that it means a damn thing."

And, indeed, in the midst of the deep darkness, the building shone as if aflame with infernal whiteness. The moon was the most logical cause, but that didn't stop the scene from bearing a striking resemblance to a giant's grave.

Lu directed his gaze to the perimeter. It would have been clearer by daylight, but he thought this seemed to match the target area's description.

This wasn't the countryside; there actually were a number of unlit buildings lined up here. It's was just that there were no people around. That, if anything, made this feel like a graveyard.

Odaiba, Tokyo.

Thanks to errors on the part of the C.A.U.C.D.P (Coastal Auxiliary Urban Center Development Program), this area had become a ghost town. While some people still came during daylight, at night, not even the shadowed form of a stray dog could be spotted here.

To those hailing from Hong Kong, the "Nightless Palace," this darkness seemed like some kind of joke.

Why had this place become abandoned? Lu couldn't quite come to terms with this, but tried to focus on the task at hand.

"Sir, are our trading partners Japanese?"

Woo just muttered a confirmation in an "it doesn't really matter" way. The Japanese are known as the world's greatest purchasers of useless things.

"Let's just get this done quick and go home."

“Gah-”

Lu grabbed a mysteriously bulging attaché case from the back seat.

Woo turned to face the building, which appeared to be over forty stories tall.

About 30 stories up, a single lit floor wrapped the building in a band of brightness and apart from that one floor, the rest of the area remained unlit.

"Shit!"

Woo's foul temper shot up another notch.

In the midst of the darkness, the neon lighting seemed fitting. No one would ever know what had occurred in the silence once you'd been and gone from there.

"....."

They scanned the area for the presence of friends or foes, but found nothing.

Though his fears weren't quite alleviated, Woo began to head toward the building. Lu picked up the case and followed him.

A survey of the interior revealed that it matched the dead appearance of the exterior. No signs of human presence could be noted. After its construction, no tenants had arrived, leaving it to nothing but decay. This was a building left to rot. In its fate, could be seen the fate of this town.

However, as soon as Woo stepped inside, he could feel that something was different in here.

"... Clear."

At that single word, Lu released the safety on his gun strapped to his side.

The deal was to go down to the 34th floor. When Woo stepped into the elevator, he tried the buttons for the floors immediately above and below, but there was no response. It was probably just out of order, but, something felt wrong about it.

Thump, thump, thump - their footsteps struck the flooring with an uninspiring, muffled sound.

It didn’t look like any funds had been put into the upkeep of this area. It’s likely that no tenants ever tread these floors.

“34” finally appeared on the elevator’s floor display.

“Let’s roll.”

With a slight look of concern, Lu nodded in response. The door silently opened.

“.....”

Beyond the door, the 34th floor lay before them. As Woo considered the myriad of doors and corridors, he found himself, quite unexpectedly, to be a bit exhausted by the prospect.

This floor had quite a sprawling layout. It looked as if it had once been an office, with desks still positioned around the area. All manner of books, binders, memo pads, magazines, and other paper waste were scattered about.

Woo and Lu swept their gaze across the scene before them. It did not seem to conceal any human presence.

The pair’s gaze soon joined at the center of the space. There stood a rather large, round table of the sort that might be used for holding meetings. It wasn’t anything particularly out of place. It merely appeared to have been moved from the company’s meeting room.

Behind this table stood a pair of people.

"Welcome! We've been waiting for you!"

This was said in an elevated tenor by a blond man in a dark blue suit who stood with his arms held wide. At first glance he appeared to be young, but as his eyes were concealed by sunglasses, it was impossible to be certain.

The person standing beside him was a woman.

Her skin and long, black hair appeared typically Asian. Her eyes were also hidden behind sunglasses, but from her nose, her lips, and the blush of her cheeks, it was possible to place her age at 20 or so. She wore an unfashionable coat that somewhat resembled a lab coat. Beneath that, could be barely glimpsed: a shirt, a tie, and a skirt that fell below the knee. Sexiness, fashion sense, trendiness: she clearly couldn't even begin to consider these things.

"....."

The woman nervously opened and closed her mouth. The blond had probably taught her some words of greeting to use, and she was clearly trying to say them, but nothing was successfully getting past her lips. Clearly, she was quite nervous.

Woo and Lu stepped wordlessly onto the 34th floor. The flooring gave off the same weak sound as that in the elevator.

As they approached the table, their gaze swept across their surroundings. They swore there had to be others hiding in the shadows behind the pillars, but they didn't spot anyone. It seems that as far as the eye could see, they were alone on the floor.

As they walked toward the table, a smile flashed across the blond's face.

Woo relaxed slightly when he spotted the suitcase next to the blond.

The woman, clearly unable to relax, openly swept her gaze between Woo's face and the case that Lu carried. Her neck swung back and forth in time with her oscillating gaze, giving her the appearance of a clockwork doll.

Woo was now quite confident. But, why would such an unguarded person be here?

Before long, the two groups faced each other across the barrier of the table.

"I deeply apologize for the long journey required to join us here, Master Woo."

"I don't really like being called 'Master' by people I've just met."

Woo rejected the tone with which the blond had begun.

“That's rude.”

But the blond paid him no heed.

Woo’s gaze moved across to the woman.

“What’s with her?”

She tightened up at the question. “I’m staff... This may seem rude, but I’m here as an appraiser.”

“An appraiser?”

“Yes. How can I explain it, I’m a neutral party to both sides. Saying this might make you uncomfortable, but if someone were to be taken in by a forgery, it’d be a real problem.”

Woo raised his left eyebrow an inch.

“What? You don’t trust us?”

“Ah, it’s not that...”

The blond had smoothly interjected.

All of a sudden, the conversation had begun to throw off its initial pretense.

“.....”

Woo’s near-audible gaze swept over the woman.

“... E-excuse me~”.

As it lingered on her agitated face, an awkwardly polite laugh floated in the air. It was a laugh that was a hair away from breaking out of its formality.

“Well, that’s ok. It’s not like we’re gonna be friends or anything.”

Woo completely ignored the woman’s nervous laughter. After all, it clearly wasn’t just this situation that this hapless woman didn’t understand. Whichever way the job went, you had to stay aloof. Once you grasped that, you could

proceed in talks much more easily.

While the laugh still floated in the air, Woo turned to face the woman.

“Open that coat; show us what’s underneath.”

“!”

The woman’s laugh died out, and she began to blush fiercely.

“What’s the matter? Hurry up and do it.”

Her voice trembling as if she were about to cry, the woman responded.

“..... That’s sick.”

The temperature in the room rose precipitously.

“The hell did you just say?!”

He hadn’t had a woman call him ‘sick’ in decades. In response, Woo had gotten a bit distracted, quite uncharacteristically, from the deal at hand.

“Anyway... I said, show us.”

Chuckling, the blond man explained the situation to the woman.

“This is all just a misunderstanding. He’d just like to verify you aren’t hiding any weapons under there.”

Sweat pouring off her, she violently inhaled.

“I... I was just surprised. I’m sorry. Really, I am...”

“That’s fine; now get the front of that open!”

Woo was nearly shouting at this point.

“Y-yes!”

Shocked into action, she flung the front of her coat open.

“?!”

Woo and Lu’s gaze traced over every curve of her unexpectedly impressive figure as they made their inspection.

But that wasn’t what surprised them most.

Inside the coat, they didn’t spot anything that looked much like a weapon. However, the lining was riddled with randomly placed pockets, each one stuffed with novels, rolled-up magazines, newspapers, and so forth.

“....What the hell is this?”

In response to Woo's perfectly reasonable question, the woman beamed out with expression and voice alike.

“Books!”

“I can see that! But why’d you bring all those?!”

“Well, when riding the train, wouldn’t it be a problem if there wasn’t anything to read?!”

Woo wasn’t quite able to believe that she could have been so put out over a thing like that.

“One newspaper’s good enough!”

“Just that?! That wouldn’t last a minute! And that’s supposed to satisfy people?!”

She whipped out a novel and thrust it towards him.

“Look, in this, ‘The Love Song from above the Sky’, the last scene can really make you cry. The one where the lovers from rival houses sing that ballad...”

Woo paid no heed to her chattering, instead fixating on her beauty.

“What is she, really?”

“An appraiser.”

The blond’s smiling response was the last straw. This whole situation just wasn’t right, and overall, he just didn’t get what was going on here.

“..... Ok, that’s it.”

At Woo’s outburst, the blond held up his hand to signal the woman to stop. She pursed her lips and reluctantly put the book away.

“Well, let’s keep this moving along, shall we? Could you please show us the item in question?”

Woo glanced at Lu. The latter nodded and lifted an attaché case onto the table.

“.... Open it.”

Lu began to clear the case’s three-stage locking mechanism, which involved a card-key, a dial, and a fingerprint scan.

With a whoosh and a muffled thump, the case opened.

“.... Show ‘em.”

At Woo’s command, Lu flipped the case around so that the blond and his companion could see its contents.

The case was of Australian military manufacture. It was rumored that any attacks against it would be absorbed by two kinds of damage-negating materials.

Woo opened up with a few boasts.

“The case always stays at 15 degrees Celsius. The dehumidification and ventilation systems are perfect. Its water and assault resistance are clearly both military grade. Even if I were to really put my mind to it, it’d take me a lifetime to bust through that. I’d bet my mother’s ass on it.”

“That was a beautiful expression.”

Within its indulgently protective environment, the main star of the evening was enshrined.

“Here’s the item you wanted.”

Like the crown jewels, this was something to be handled gently and with the greatest respect.

It was a book. Bound in black leather, it appeared quite ancient. On the cover, the book's title was stitched with gold thread.

"'The Black Collection of Maxims for Youth'. It is said that in the year 1643, Angelica Laston wrote this book for use by her sponsor's family. The 'Maxims for Youth' are there only in name, as the contents and illustrations are an unabashed escape into eroticism and evil combined. As this was a most secret book, only one authenticated copy was known to exist. Fanatics of the 'Youth Maxim' genre worldwide are dying to own this, and would drool over the mere opportunity to hold this Holy Grail."

"Yes, yes, yes...."

The blond nodded his head endlessly throughout Woo's explanation.

"But, where did you find it? I had heard that its whereabouts had been unknown for quite some time."

"Seven days ago, Renaldo Tucker in Utah died, catch my drift?"

"I did hear that, but--"

"This was found in his 8th book storehouse. For the past twenty years, it didn't show up in any private or public showings, so odds are - he was keeping it hidden."

In seeming agreement, the blond responded.

"Tucker's shelves were called a 'sea of books', yes? Having heard that, it certainly seems plausible."

"His relatives are gonna take over his used book operation soon. There's talk of it ending up as more of a storehouse than an actual shop."

"That's only to be expected, for such a collection has never been assembled outside Heaven, eh?"

As Woo and the blond exchanged comments, Lu’s expression began to grow rather dubious.

The one that Lu was watching was the woman next to the blond.

She didn’t seem to hear any of the conversation: she was staring rapturously at the book. Even through the sunglasses, the intensity of her gaze was clear.

“Aaah....”

The woman’s mouth had opened, and a few noises slipped out.

“... Could ya take a look at this?”

Since the first moan had escaped the woman, Woo had been aware of her condition. However, as she was supposed to be acting as the appraiser, he didn't have a reason to deny that request.

“That’d be fine, right? Hey--”

Midway through his speech, he turned to face his companion.

Lu had put on a pair of white gloves, and now he reverently lifted a book from the case.

With skill and respect, he angled the book toward the woman and held it toward her. Like a kid who’d been presented with his Christmas gift, she greedily grabbed for the thing.

“!”

However, a confused Lu pulled the book back out of her reach.

“Huh?! .... What did you do that for?!”

The woman was shocked and spoke out angrily. Her voice conveyed a mixture of surprise and outright rage. However, Lu remained unflinchingly in place.

“Gah!”

With his white-gloved hand, Lu pointed at her mouth.

“Huh?”

A single bead of fluid trickled down.

“Aaaah!”

Unable to bear it any longer, Woo had to shout.

This was a case of drool beyond human comprehension. By virtue of its unbelievable viscosity, the leading drip hung past the woman’s chest.

“Eh...? Oh, aaaah!”

The woman’s face blushed a bright red, and she vigorously wrung her hands. With that movement, the drool vanished toward the tabletop. Across the table, neither Woo nor Lu spotted it, but...

“I-I’m so sorry!”

The woman deeply inclined her head. Next to her, the blond laughed painfully.

“You gotta be kidding me. You dirty it and we’ll be taking the full price for it.”

“No, no, please allow me to apologize. It’s that she’s a die hard bibliomaniac. If a rare book is placed before her, she gets a bit over-excited, you could say.”

The woman’s eyes were downcast, and her cheeks still bore a full blush.

“Watch out, then...”

Furrowing his brow, Lu presented the book a second time. At that movement, the woman suddenly jerked her head back up.

She seemingly hadn’t learned much from the last incident.

Lu handed her the book, and she released a faint sigh. Lu yanked his arms back in fear, as if from some sort of looming horror.

Ever so slowly, the woman drew the book up to her chest.

“That’s pretty bold of you. You’ll get the damn thing dirty!”

She was handling it without gloves, so as to better examine the paper quality of the book. Woo knew this, but was still uncomfortable.

The woman inclined her head toward the blond.

“...May I?”

“Please hold it in.”

“... C’mon. If I don’t take a closer look, I won’t have full faith in my analysis.”

The blond was silent for a moment, and then:

“I suppose there’s no way around it. ... Well, you can go ahead.”

The granting of permission sunk into the woman. She eagerly knelt down on the floor.

"Hey, what in the...?"

Before Woo could finish his question, the woman had removed her sunglasses. Unlike what one would have expected to see once her face was exposed, beneath the sunglasses she had been wearing a pair of black-rimmed glasses. This struck both Woo and Lu as something of an anti-climax.

Her misshapen glasses only served to exacerbate her unfashionable appearance.

However, through the lenses her large eyes shone with a light that threatened to overwhelm the two men.

To the clearly-intent woman, the blond man raised his voice.

“Mind you, this is just to inspect it. Now’s not the time for in-depth reading.”

With a white fingertip, the woman traced along the edge of the book, gently, as if caressing it. *She's just doing that to check the quality,* thought Woo.

She flipped over the book and repeated the process of tracing along the cover. What could be the purpose of that?

As he watched her, Lu began to grow fixated on the woman.

With a few faint, eager breaths, the woman opened the book. All of a sudden the book flipped open to its center, and the one who had opened it was forced to avert her eyes.

“Ahhahahahahaha.....”

Her cheeks blushed bright red, and tears floated in her eyes. She had the look of a girl who had just received a confession of love. Clearly, something had excited her deep within her self. This seemingly unfashionable and less than charming woman had given the room a tinge of sexuality.

Her appeal was that of a high-class courtesan, multiplied by a thousand-fold. A single moan escaped her throat. In reponse, Lu forced himself to lock his jaw in place and swallow hard.

Suddenly, the woman dropped her head onto the book with a ‘wumph’.

“Oy!”

Woo had to say something after that unexpected action.

The blond thrust his arms forward as he tried to keep the situation in check.

“Don’t worry yourself. She’s not going to rub her face against it or anything of that nature; this is merely to test the scent.”

“The scent?”

“The scent of the paper - that too may indicate the quality of the materials from which the book is made.”

“I do know that much, but...”

“It’s that understanding that she is trying to reach.”

The blond sharply cut off Woo’s statement.

“Through proof gleaned by scientific techniques and historical evidence, writing style, and the content of the piece, we may draw conclusions about an item’s legitimacy. Typically those three methods are enough to show us whether a book is genuine or not, but occasionally, there comes a person who has developed some other, unique method.”

While the blond strung together his explanation, the woman sniffed at the book.

“The emotion the author infused into the book, the immense time spent in its creation, the level of skill involved; these things are not possible to counterfeit. A person such as I have described, one such as she, may “read” those things beneath the surface of the paper. And even more rarely, such a person may so strongly understand the feelings within books that for him, or for her, books

become a weapon. .... She is also of that sort."

"....Hmm...."

There may as well have not been an answer, as the woman began to produce small noises from within the cracked-open book. It was clear that she was in ecstasy.

Woo was starting to feel some undefinable unease with the deal at hand. From the moment he first saw the building, the impression of wrongness had been there. This feeling caused something poisonous and serpentine to stir within him.

In his normal dealings, he'd met with appraisers on a regular basis; however, he'd never encountered one who used "scent" to determine the veracity of an item.

The woman looked up at him.

Her eyes were cloudy with tears of joy, and her face had flushed to a rosy hue.

"Well, what do you think?"

"It's...the real thing..."

The woman answered as if she were intoxicated. Her words buried themselves into Woo's breast, biting ever deeper into him. Of course it was the real thing. It'd taken $1,000,000 to acquire this book.

"Splendid. I would expect no less of Mr. Woo, the "Reader's Snake" - Not that I didn't trust you, of course."

"No worries. So long as we get our cash, it'll all be just fine."

He brushed the blond's words aside. At any rate, the deal's completion lay right around the corner. At that thought, his expression lightened.

"However, in all the world, there can't be another like her."

"Is that so?"

The one who answered wasn't the woman, but instead, the blond. The woman

still clutched the book to her chest as she stared dazedly off into space.

As it were, she was acting like the book were a present to her self.

“’Cause the kind of person who’d be a collector is damn near always male.”

“If that’s what’s said, it must be true.”

“Women just get turned off easily. They don’t have the drive or whatever, to get a ton of something -- especially when it’s something as friggin’ useless as books.”

At that last statement, the woman started a little. From the imaginary pleasure garden in which it had been meandering, her gaze snapped immediately to Woo.

“That was quite an unexpected thing to say. Does Mr. Woo find books to be useless??”

Woo struck back violently at the blond’s words.

“Books - the damn things take up space, they’re heavy, and they’re just a waste of paper which doesn’t serve any real purpose whatsoever.”

“Alright. However, don’t you at least read with some measure of frequency?”

Woo let loose an ironic laugh.

“I don't read ‘em and I don’t write ‘em. They’re just merchandise. It’s just that they only really make money this way, ya know. My father and grandfather, they did the same.”

“I see...”

Across from the barely responsive blond, the woman’s aspect had changed.

“...You!”

Woo could hear the rage in the woman’s voice.

“What could you possibly be talking about?! Books are the world’s treasures, within which are found the distillation of all the knowledge of mankind!”

Woo’s eyes bulged at the woman’s vehemence. The last time he’d heard a woman raise her voice in anger was when his female schoolteachers had scolded him. Next to him, Lu’s face grew angry out of a sense of brotherhood with his comrade.

“For decades, for centuries, since antiquity, people from the underworld have thought of paper as something to pass along, to use to communicate, and then, to destroy! Sometimes through intelligence, sometimes through devotion, meaningful thoughts have been drawn from a universe of possibilities! With the depth of feeling that is imparted by such a thing as a book, you call it trash?! You had best take that back!”

Her angry words built up to a crescendo. However, the expression that drifted across Woo’s face wasn’t of anger, so much as overwhelming surprise.

The now-flustered blond covered the woman’s mouth.

“Mmph!”

“Thi-this has been incredibly rude of us. As had been said, when it comes to books, she’s more or less one to get too caught up in things... Could I possibly beg your forgiveness in this matter?”

When the one who had blocked her mouth drew back, the woman remained silent, and a contemplative look floated across her face.

“Ah, yeah...”

Woo managed a nod in response. As far as Lu knew, of all those who had gone against Woo, not a one had come out of it without some injury, be it large or small. This time Woo had seemingly been overpowered.

The woman’s voice, her eyes, her expression: all of these were simply overwhelming.

Employing a pleasant tone of voice, the blond tried to put things back in line.

“Just as I’d expected of Master Woo. No, no, it’s truly been an honor to meet you.”

“Not so fast with the ‘has been’ — how about paying up first?”

Woo’s gaze began to regain its focus. Now that the situation was returning to his preferred pace, that gaze was able to cling to a clear goal.

“Yes indeed. Here we are.”

The blond placed another case on the table’s surface. Unlike Woo’s case, this was of a common sort.

“Go right ahead.”

He opened the case and turned it, as with the other, toward Woo and Lu. A total of $3,000,000 was neatly arrayed in rows of bundled bills.

“Show me.”

In accordance with Woo’s request, the blond slid the case toward him. Lu picked up one bundle of bills.

“.....”

His facial expression did not change; however, the atmosphere was suddenly heavy and oppressive. Lu thrust the upturned back of the bundle toward Woo.

“..... The hell is with this, you British bastard?”

Woo’s voice was quiet. The cold rage was audibly restrained, as the bundle’s underside was, quite against expectations, blank. This wasn’t a bundle of bills. It was a packet of paper.

“Oh, what you see before you? It’s paper. Nothing more.”

“Don’t mess around!”

That wasn’t so much a mere expression of anger as a raging roar. Woo crushed the paper packet and hurled it at the two across the table. With an effortless movement, the blond intercepted the paper that was aimed at him, but the paper that went toward the woman scored a direct hit on her chest, as she had both arms wrapped around the book.

“So all you brought to pay for this book is this paper trash? That's how the English work, eh?”

Lu reached behind him and drew his gun. The gun’s barrel was first aimed at the blond. He was ready to open fire at Woo’s command.

“The British way is one of courtesy and fair play. Not to be rude, but it doesn’t look like you two use either of those.”

“The hell?” Woo’s voice had diminished after the blond’s statement.

“This book was stolen 25 years ago from the British Library. According to our research, the theft had been carried out by a certain syndicate.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“The British Library’s Special Operations Division, a division that we are a part of, will return this book to the place where it should be.”

Woo remained silent and instead drew his own gun.

“One moment; hear me out. Wouldn’t you rather resolve this situation peacefully? It’s alright to just hash things out verbally every so often, in my opinion.”

At the blond’s somewhat half-hearted proposal, Woo’s face contorted into a new level of maliciousness.

“You can suck on that in hell.”

“..... That didn’t make much sense, but it’s probably some sort of refusal; is that correct?”

The barrel of Woo’s gun veered toward the woman, who hugged the book even more tightly.

“..... Give that book back.”

“I will not. This is mine now.”

“Actually, it’s the British Library’s.”

“It’s mine, dammit!”

From the woman’s statement to the blond’s and then to Woo’s was the book’s status revised. As they had no intention of paying, Woo felt no need to hesitate. The finger that pulls the trigger has all the power. The gun’s line of fire shifted to the bridge of the woman’s glasses.

The woman’s hand shifted to grasp the paper that had struck her chest.

Woo pulled the trigger, and a bullet burst from the gun.

The report of the gun was swallowed up by the barren expanse of the floor.

“What?!”

Woo’s eyes widened.

The woman’s face had lost all color, but not due to the expected blood loss from a gunshot wound. The bullet that should have smashed her glasses and opened a hole in her forehead was lost in a mass of whiteness.

A single, raised piece of paper that was held before the woman’s face had stopped it.

“Wha.....?!”

It was definitely the same paper that he had thrown at her. By all appearances, it was the sort of paper you would find anywhere and where it had stopped the bullet, it looked as if it had been ripped by a cat’s claws.

However, before his very eyes, that paper had managed to stop the bullet he had just fired.

“Aaah?!”

Lu reacted faster than even Woo. Changing targets from the blond to the woman, he immediately followed through and pulled the trigger. The bullet roared forth unstoppable.

“Whoa! Ah, ah, ex-excuse me!”

That voice had sufficient volume to make a pool’s contents slosh over its sides. The woman began to sling individual sheets of paper until every bullet had been stopped.

“What—what would you have done if the book got hit?!”

Eyes bulging with shock, Lu looked to Woo. Before giving him an answer, Woo again pointed the gun at the woman.

If they both fired at once, surely she wouldn’t be able to completely handle the assault. That was how his current plan went.

However, the woman had, right at that moment, begun to catch on.

“Really now!”

She neatened her packet of papers and then fired them off into space.

The sheets of paper formed a storm of fluttering paper, which divided the area into two sections like a white wall.

The pure white barrier hid the woman and her ally from Woo, Lu, and their bullets alike.

By the time the continuous hail of bullets had knocked down every sheet of paper in the wall, the blond and the woman had seemingly up and disappeared.

As Woo stood dumbfounded, a piece of paper flew out of nowhere and sliced his gun open as if the paper were a razor.

“Shi—“

Woo nearly dragged Lu over to the table and dove for cover beneath it. The next moment, with a sharp woosh that sliced the air, more paper flew toward the spot where they had been standing.

“Whoa, whoooa!”

As Woo tried to calm Lu, who had started to panic, he pulled the paper from his gun and tore it up.

“A paper master...”

“?!”

“I’ve heard of ‘em. Like the name says, they’ve got some unnatural power that lets them use paper as weaponry.”

A paper airplane flew by and tacked toward Lu’s feet. On its surface, it bore the words, “That is correct.”

“?!”

The blond’s voice echoed forth from an unknown location.

“So you did know. Indeed.”

Lu forgot the situation and rose to fire off some more shots.

“Gaaah!”

At Lu were now aimed a veritable flood of paper airplanes.

“Idiot!”

With a hair’s breath of space remaining, Woo dragged Lu to the floor. Hundreds of paper airplanes rushed through the space above their heads like some sort of storm.

“That’s not paper; those are implements of hell! Don’t make any stupid moves.”

On the huffing and puffing Lu’s face a few cuts were evident.

In front of the pair, like remnants of the paper airplanes, some documents fluttered down. When they picked one up for examination, they found that the documents were articles of surrender. The right to a lawyer, the right to remain silent, and various other stipulations were written out in great detail.

“You’re underestimating me, dammit!”

Giving in to his anger, Woo had to snap rattlingly back.

“Umm, it would probably be best for you to surrender. In such a case, you’d receive proper judgment.”

“Agent Paper, Negotiation would be meaningless. Please don’t try to speed up the process.”

“Ok...”

“We can’t win now! Who the hell could get a monster like they have, anyway?”

After a paper-like silence, a pitiful crying noise was heard.

“.....Sniff, sniff.”

“Er, I would like you not to hurt my agent’s feelings, thank you.”

“Shuddup!”

Lu didn’t like what he saw in the angrily shouting Woo.

“Now don’t get scared. This is just how I fight.”

Woo took the snake from his breast.

“It’s better if I get to kill her in person.”

Standing suddenly, Woo took off his suit-jacket and shirt and threw them aside. The physique beneath was wrapped in metal snakes that looked at if they bound him. Donning the snake-attachment that had peeked from his breast pocket, he also had lined up in his belt other, identical snake heads, as well as three more snake bodies.

On his naked upper half, he was marked with living snake scales, producing an eerie effect on the onlooker.

A paper airplane flew toward the now-revealed Woo.

“Die!” He gripped the snake by the tail and began to spin it.

The snake smoothly released from Woo’s body, forming a whip as if went; the snake-whip then struck at the oncoming paper airplane. The struck plane crashed

down to pierce the table.

“Ho!” The blond’s voice held mingled appreciation and wonder.

“How many of her paper weapons can you put up against my snakes!”

Toward the broadly grinning Woo flew another, larger paper airplane.

“Die, die, die, die, die! And, die!”

Moving too quickly for it to register with his lackey, his snake struck out violently. The paper airplane was knocked from the air, and individual bits of paper fluttered about like snow. Beyond the paper haze, a human shape floated in and out of sight.

“Kill them!”

Lu leapt forward and began to charge toward the figures.

“Gwaaah!”

Lu’s tackle knocked down the shape leaning against the table’s surface; however...

“Gwah?!”

This was neither the woman nor the blond; instead, it was the life-size idol stand-up used at Shueisha’s spring book fair.

“Get back here; it’s a trap!”

It was too late. In the blink of an eye, from the edge of the table, from the ceiling, from the masses of trash, an onslaught of paper tape was triggered, centered on the stand-up's position.

“!”

In the next instant, the tape began to circle Lu; a unified assault was starting.

“Arrrrgh!” The tape began to wind around his body. Despite his struggles, Lu rapidly took on the appearance of a mummy. Not letting up for even an instant,

the tape began to quickly tighten around his body.

“Shi—!“

From behind the back of Woo, who had headed toward Lu to help him, came the sound of rustling paper.

Turning about to face the threat, Woo whipped the snake around. However, what came flying at him weren’t paper airplanes, but instead, unfolded sheets of paper. That paper, no thicker than ordinary writing paper, was beyond the snake’s power to stop.

The deflected papers cast a shadow over Woo’s face as they disappeared behind him.

“So, how about it? Have you warmed to the thought of surrendering?”

Behind the mummified Lu, Woo licked the blood that had trickled down from his forehead.

“Well, they do call me the ‘Reading Snake’, ya know, and it’s not ‘cause I use this guy.”

Woo ripped off his snake’s head, tossed the rest away, and equipped a new attachment to the snake. From its mouth emerged the sharp point of an edged weapon. Across Woo’s face drifted a diabolical grin sharp enough to shatter any blade.

“Blame my nature. I’ve just gotta kill me some prey.”

“.... I understand completely. ..... Agent Paper—!”

At that instant, another storm of paper rushed toward Woo.

Woo loosened his grip on the snake. With that, the snake collapsed and merged into itself, thus transforming it from a whip into a rod.

“Die!”

Woo caused the snake-rod to spin rapidly, as if it were a baton. One after the

other the paper sheets that had flown at him folded before the snake-rod, and were scattered.

Beyond the resultant paper storm, Woo spotted, beneath a desk, the hand that had launched the paper.

“I’ve got ya now!”

Knocking all of the paper away, he wielded the snake-rod like a spear to pierce through the desk. He then he levered it up and hurled it away. The desk smashed through a window and descended into the darkness of the night.

Beyond where the now dealt-with desk once stood, knelt the woman. A lone piece of paper lay on the floor.

“Huh?!”

As her location was now compromised, the woman began to shamefully crawl away. However, her path had been blocked.

“Bah!” Woo’s snake-blade now pointed straight at her throat.

“You’re done for, Agent Paper.”

He thrust his chin in Lu’s direction and gave an order.

“....Let’im out of there.”

The paper tape that had been binding Lu loosened immediately, and his heavy form thudded down onto the floor.

“Gwaaa!”

Tearing the remaining tape off of him, Lu rose to his feet.

“... You just weren’t good enough, Agent Paper.”

“... I’m sorry. ...”

Her voice carried a tinge of sadness. However, this wasn’t kind of sadness that comes of being up to the ears in deadly danger; it was instead that seen in a student who had scored badly on an exam. That attitude angered Woo.

“You get out here too, you British bastard!”

“Sure. Here we go.”

Soon, from beneath a neighboring desk the blond’s form took shape. The woman was as shocked as Woo that he hadn’t spotted the blond.

“Well, I’ve come to appreciate what ‘the Reading Snake’ truly means. I have learned from this.”

“... Line up.”

The blond positioned himself by the side of the nervously standing woman. Just as they had at the start of the deal, the four participants faced each other at two hand spans’ range.

“Now we kill you.”

“Before that... why not surrender to us? If you’d do that for us, then surely the cleanup after all this would be so much easier?”

Nowhere in the blond’s speech was the slightest hint of nervousness to be found.

“You want us to do WHAT?! You dumb ass, you must have wastepaper where your brains’d be.”

“...In the end, it was futile. I suppose there’s nothing to be done about it, you know?”

The blond and the woman exchanged looks.

“Let’s move to the endgame.”

“Yes...”

Woo, for his part, was now angry at the fact that his two opponents were not showing any fear at all. It felt like this ridiculous night was racing toward its climax. When the feeling came to a crescendo, more words burst forth.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll goddamn kill you right now!”

The woman looked at the two opponents with a jolted expression. However, the one who opened his mouth to speak was the blond.

“Excuse me, but the fighting is going to end now.”

“What?”

“Ah—to put it this way, just coming here was a loss for you two.”

The blond pointed toward the table where the two groups had met.

“.....”

Without thinking, Woo looked where the blond had pointed. The table was just a bit warped. It was a small imperfection, no bigger than the mouth of a beer bottle.

Internally, Woo flashed back to a recent memory. It was one of the woman’s

drool.

“Can’t be!!”

Woo’s thoughts had arrived at an absurd conclusion. Was it really that?!

“That is quite correct.”

So that was it. The blond laughed.

“..... I’m sorry.”

The woman had dropped her head.

At the same time, Woo and Lu’s knees bent out wildly. The feedback they were receiving from their legs had to be illusory. The floor on which they stood was now heaving and jumping beneath them. Their footing became uncertain, their balance was thrown off, and soon they found it impossible to remain standing. A horrible, uncomforting memory rushed back to them.

“Freaking stupid?! This, THIS?!”

Looking next to him, he found that Lu had fallen down. Lu’s face was screwed up, as if he were about to cry. Looking beyond the floor to the walls and ceilings, it was clear that the building was folding in on itself.

“This is----------?!”

Proving Woo’s presumption to be fully correct, the floor collapsed. Below that, the abyss of 30th floor gaped up at them. The “tear” swallowed up Woo and Lu in the space of a breath.

Burnt into the vision of the plummeting Woo were the remains of the rent paper floor and, from above that, the form and concerned expression of the woman who peered down after him.

On what had up until noon that day been mere reclaimed land, the building folded onto itself and collapsed. A dry, rustling noise paralleled its fall.

Shredding and scattering the remaining bits of the building, a helicopter’s form

appeared in the midst of the scene. Tossing petal-like pieces of paper around, it rose to a high elevation, in nearly the blink of an eye.

In the front seat was a blond, sunglass-wearing form.

“This is Joker. Repeat, this is Joker. All mission stages have been completed safely. After the acquisition, as well as protection, of the target, I would like to request that it be sent in for processing. Joker is now heading home, as is The Paper. Report to be given on a later date. Joker out.”

After finishing his report over the radio, “Joker” massaged his neck.

“Aaah, so tired. After all, when the ones you have to deal with are unsavory sorts, it really grates on the nerves.”

Joker sent his next statement to the seats at the rear. “Good work, Yomiko. I’ll be sure to take you to Jimboch.....”

His words did not make it through to the girl with the glasses—Yomiko.

She was completely immersed in “Black Maxims for Youth”, as if she were intending to devour it. Her eyes eagerly chased after the characters, and Joker’s voice and the roar of the helicopter were lost in her oblivion.

Beneath her large, hard glasses, her dark eyes moved incessantly.

“Well, well.”

Joker shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the front.

The pilot raised his voice excitedly. “Pa-paper master! So they really do exist. I feel greatly honored to be able to work with one! I-if it’s ok, afterward, a signature...”

Turning to Yomiko, enrapt in her book, Joker laughed.

“No trouble, no trouble at all. Ah, but until she’s finished reading, she won’t hear a thing we say. It’s a weakness of hers.”

Desires, criticisms, and anything else was inaudible to her. Yomiko Readman,

“The Paper”, had submerged herself completely in the pleasure of reading. She had even forgotten the faces of Woo and Lu.

She loved books more than anything; indeed, anything at all.

The helicopter left the dark town of Daiba behind it, as the moonlit night flew to the four corners of the capital’s core.

Chapter 1 - The Two Sensei

Chapter 1: The Two Sensei[edit]

Cherry petals were dotted across the pavement, seemingly the last vestiges of spring.

Up the road that led through the school's gate, groups of girls walked at a measured pace, their forms wrapped in uniform blazers.

Two weeks had passed since the start of the new school year, and the early nervousness had now faded from every face. In its stead, relaxation or, even at this early stage, boredom, would peek through before being hidden away.

The first-years were discussing the fact that high school apparently wasn't going to be a mere extension of middle school; the second-years were enjoying putting off concrete concerns about their next so-called battle, the college examinations; and the third-years were lost in uneasiness-tinged dreams of whether they would, in a year's time, find themselves standing on that battle's winning or losing side.

It could be said that the road that lead to Kakinezaka Metropolitan High School was a model of peace and tranquility.

To examine the quality of the individual students, while there were probably a few problem students, there hadn't been any incidents severe enough to warrant coverage in newspapers or magazines.

As far as schools went, this one had no real distinguishing characteristics, and due to that, was known to local teachers to be a "no-risk" school. Thus, this school should be as calm as could be expected of a city school.

Up the hill to this peaceful academy, a single woman walked in the midst of the students.

Although the sun's rays were already quite warm, she wore an unfashionable white coat.

She was going on a trip, or perhaps returning from one. She pulled behind her a suitcase with small wheels and an extendable handlebar. It produced a clacking sound as it rolled along.

Her hair was black and worn long. On her face was a pair of frighteningly thick-framed glasses.

This was a woman who seemed to have neither knowledge nor interest in fashion, style, or trends.

She looked to be in her mid-20s, perhaps a bit younger.

Most of the students didn't seem to pay her much mind. They thought it was just another O.L. passing through on a trip, a perfectly normal event.

Compounding the situation, she was just as oblivious of the students as they were of her. Her awareness was fixed exclusively on the book that she held poised before her eyes.

"....."

Her gaze chased rapidly along the lines of characters arrayed upon the pages. From time to time she took a page between her thumb and pinky, and with a flicking motion, sent it flying.

On the cover of the volume could be seen a logo featuring the title "The Streetcorner where the Cats Live", as well as an illustration of a smiling girl embracing a mass of kittens. It looked like a junior novel, the sort aimed at teens.

The woman's steps led steadily onward, while she remained wholly engrossed in the book, but even when she went astray, there wasn't anything that posed any danger to her. Even if it looked as if she were going to crash into a telephone pole, or if a bicycle came at her, she always avoided it. Without paying any attention, she seemed to posses an innate, immensely accurate evasive ability.

Presumably, she read while walking whenever she went out. This "habit" was definitely not the sort of thing that developed overnight.

The woman's feet stopped before the school gate.

Thrusting the book to her chest, she released a small sigh. Both of her cheeks were stained with a light pink blush. Above that, both eyes were slightly blurred by tears.

After marking her place with a beribboned bookmark, she opened to the flap of the book's cover.

Therein lay a head-shot of the author and a short biography.

Out of the photo smiled a girl with hair that stuck out at the back. Though this was labeled a recent photo of the author, she looked too young for the part.

She was in fact that young. The author of this book, Nenene Sumiregawa, was a mere 17 years of age and thus was a high school student.

Though no one had asked, the woman read the contents of the profile aloud.

"Nenene Sumiregawa... Presently attending a particular high school in the city, every day she must balance the onerous demands of homework and her literary career...."

The students that were walking up the road behind her responded to her unprompted babbling with dubious expressions.

However, without paying any heed to what was going on around her, she returned the book to a coat pocket.

".....Aha~ ♪"

Directing her attention to the school building, her face lit up with an unsinkable smile.

She took a deep breath and bowed her head in deep reverence. It goes without saying that she wasn't actually directing this toward anyone in particular.

"If I could have your attention please! From this day on I'll be relying on your support. I'm your new substitute teacher, Yomiko Readman!"

Just as her speech reached its end, the chime of a bell would be heard from the

roof of the school. Those students who hadn’t yet reached the entrance hall and the shoe lockers lined up therein sped up their pace.

“..... Uwatata—!“

Knowing that to be the five minute warning bell before the morning assembly, a flustered Yomiko began to run; her suitcase rattled along behind her.

“...Even so, in those times where a person’s spirit has been allowed to grow slack, unhappiness is sure to befall him...”

The weekly Monday assembly -- for the student body, the principal’s lengthy speech was no surprise.

The first-years, as was to be expected, weren’t yet inured to this, and their annoyance over when this would end was plain to see on their faces. Meanwhile, the second- and third-years would occasionally glance at their watches and think something like, “It’s been five minutes now, so he’ll probably go for another five.”

Typically enough, the principal was an elderly man, and old people are fond of long speeches. Therefore, it was natural that when the principal gave speeches, they were quite thorough and syllogistic in style.

Today, as usual, the speech dragged on for a good ten minutes. As soon as they saw the principal reverently bow his balding head to close the speech, the student body let out a sigh of deep relief as one in harmony.

“Eh, well then. Next on the agenda, I have a new teacher, whom I would like to introduce, to all of you.”

His deliberate statement, a peculiarity of his upbringing, sent ripples of unexpected interest through the assembled students.

“Abe-senshi, starting this week, will be taking pregnancy leave, and until she returns, her position, as our history teacher, will be held by this teacher.”

From the line of teachers that faced the students, a figure in a white coat began to move. Soon, it stopped at the announcement podium at the center of the stage.

"This is Yomiko Readman. Proceed."

After the head teacher's introduction, a stir arose amongst the students.

"Yomiko?"

"He say Readman? What now--some foreigner?"

Whatever their concerns, the students' awareness and attention began to home in on the podium.

A blindingly white coat and glasses with thick, dark frames. A makeup-free face, with eyes that gave the impression that their owner had just woken up.

It was quite bewitching, to those with the necessary tastes, and thus the better part of the male student body let out a despondent sigh.

As for this woman--one Yomiko Readman--she utterly failed to pick up on the atmosphere as she stood there, smiling broadly.

"Gooood morning, everyone!"

She paused for a moment. Of course, not a single student or teacher there was willing to return a "Good morning" in this situation. Absent the impressive reaction she had been expecting, she let her shoulders slump slightly.

“Soooo... Starting today, I’ll be teaching history here; I’m Yomiko Readman. Yomiko, as in “yomu ko”, or “girl who reads”, you know, books. Readman, that’s spelled R, E, A, D, M, A, N. As in, a person who reads. Uhh. It’s a name that means reading, and nothing but, you know?”

That elicited a few laughs that more closely resembled groans.

“You probably figured it out from my name, but I’m not fully Japanese. My father was English, and my mother, Japanese. The two of them reaaaally loved books, and that’s why they gave me this name, I think. Of course, with a name like this, I just had to love books too, right?”

That got a few more laughs. Yomiko seemed to take heart from that response, so she kept talking.

“Since I was a child, I never played with toys or games. It was just books, books, and more books. It was almost like I couldn’t survive without books. Whenever I went out without bringing a book, it just felt wrong.”

Yomiko produced a single book from a coat pocket. It was an implausibly large, thick hardcover.

“Look, even now. This book here is *History Repeats Itself* , and it contrasts the writings of scholars of both modern and medieval history. It’s pretty interesting, really. Those who have an interest in history, please give it a try.”

The principal nodded in approval. Such an attitude, burning with passion for education, touched his heart.

“....If you think that’s interesting, there’s this, too.”

Yomiko reached into her coat pocket again and pulled out another book.

"This action novel, *Illinois Heat*, was recently released in translation, at long last. I'd read the original version first, but still. I thought, it's out here now, so I'd better read this version, too. The translator's pretty good, so the quality was raised even higher in this version."

Yomiko thrust her hand into her pocket once more and pulled out a new book.

"This translator is also a literary critic. His critical writings have been collected in this volume, *King of Books*. It doesn't quite live up its title, though. He’s too biased against certain genres. He really smacks down any and all movie novelizations. Don’t you think that’s just plain prejudice?”

No one seemed to have a response for that. Yomiko may have been betting on that outcome or might simply have been satisfied to have expressed her thoughts, for she simply proceeded to introduce the next book.

“Speaking of movies, there’s *The ICBM of Love*, which came out last summer. That thing was really stupid. Oh, that was originally a manga, actually. ... There is that, but still. That was entitled, *The IRBM of Love*. When it came down to it, they must have figured that an ICBM would have sounded like a bigger deal than an IRBM, you know. Movie people.”

The teachers' expressions were beginning to shift. The students, too, had probably picked up on the fact that Yomiko, who had been pulling out book after book, was not normal, and were starting to whisper to their closest peers.

But Yomiko simply pulled a fifth book out of a pocket and began to describe it enthusiastically.

"Anyway, for another movie-related example, I'd like to go with this one, *Don't Chase Me into Infinity*. A lot of people avoid it since they assume it's a shojo manga, but they shouldn't, 'cause it's a reaaalll tear-jerker. Ah, the original author usually goes by Makizawa Uri-san, but using a different pen name he wrote this book, *Dotou's Newlywed Life*. That was a best-seller, so you've all heard of it, right? However, if you compare it with this one, *The Married Chimp*, you can have fun finding all the similarities between the two books. Ooh, yeah, and speaking of the chimp one, I got it signed at a meet-and-greet with different authors.... It was this copy, actually. It was more than just a signature; he even drew me stuff. You see, right here, look, it's a monkeyyy!...."

With a succession of thuds, she began to pile books on top of the podium.

In parallel to the growing number of volumes, the feeling of irritation that always filled the air during any morning exercises reached new heights.

In the end, Yomiko's speech took up a full twenty-seven minutes and covered 33 books. There was clearly more remaining at the point where she was cut off by a male teacher miming that she should step down from the stage. The students burst into grateful applause as she return to her seat.

"What's up with that teacher? Walking around with all those books, no way that's normal."

"She's pretty weird, gotta say."

Fortunately, due to the strange substitute teacher the start of classes had been pushed back.

Here, in senior class A, Hashimoto-senshi had written, perhaps with a bit more speed than usual, a problem on the blackboard, which was now chock full of

mathematical formulas.

However, the sole topic of the students' stealthy discussions was the matter of the morning's star, one Yomiko Readman.

Students who'd skipped the morning exercises were being fed exaggeration-filled explanations about their new teacher from their classmates.

"We got a sub? 'Stead of Abe-chan?"

"She was at it for a good half hour at the assembly, saying that book's good, this book's good."

"Stuff like that, no one was really into it, yeah?"

"....But ya know, she sorta had a cute face."

"You dumb ass, you got a thing for glasses? Serious?"

From the students' idle talk their impression of the new teacher could be determined, and that revolved around but a single point.

Those students who hadn't yet seen the real thing were exceedingly interested and kept pressing the eyewitnesses for more info.

"What's her name? That teacher."

"Why'd you want to know her name? Uhhh, something like..."

Hashimoto's chalk stopped, but the current problem wasn't entirely written out yet. As he turned his head to look back, the students quickly dropped their gaze toward their desk.

"Well, for this problem, let's see then, Sumi..."

"Sumiregawa, Sensei—!"

The classroom door suddenly burst open with enough energy to cancel out the rest of Hashimoto's statement.

Standing in the doorway was a disheveled-looking woman, with tears and snot

flowing freely down her face and a copy of The Streetcorner where the Cat Lives clutched tightly in her hand.

The person in question was clearly one Yomiko Readman.

“Wh-what do you need, Sensei...”

On receiving such an unexpected visitor, Hashimoto was unable to hide his surprise, but even then, he managed to speak with the demeanor of a relatively proper gentleman.

However, Yomiko didn’t even spare a glance for the aforementioned Hashimoto. While everyone present stared at her, she made a beeline for the teacher’s platform.

“I, I was just moved. Moved beyond words!”

Excitement, passion, and intoxication intermingled in her expression as her voice continued to rise.

“Your previous work, The Love Song from beneath the Ceiling, was great too, but this time it was reaaaaally amazing! Ooooh, jeeeez!”

Yomiko grabbed Hashimoto’s suit as the teacher tried to refocus on his math lesson, and proceeded to loudly blow her nose on it.

“Urgh—, aaaah—!”

Hashimoto raised a shout louder than any heard from him ever before, as that suit was a momento, having been given to him by his daughter, who had purchased it with her very first paycheck.

After swiftly depositing her snot on that heart-warming item, Yomiko turned back toward the students.

“Please sign this! I shall make it a family treasure! I will not move from this spot until you sign it! Well then, please come along quietly, Sumiregawa-sensei!”

In her defense, Yomiko normally wouldn’t be this discourteous; it’s just that she was in a state of near-arousal. After reading any interesting book, she would be

caught up by, shall we say, an overwhelming excitement.

At the back of the dumbstruck classroom, a female student raised her hand.

“Ummm—...”

“Yes?”

“Nenene, she’s in the Library Room...”

“Huh?”

“‘Cause she’s got a deadline coming up. I think she’s writing her draft.”

“’Cause she’s a famous author, ya know. ‘Course she’d be busy with work, right?”

Something in the tone of voice used by the student who’d cut into the conversation gave the impression that this was a long-standing issue, but Yomiko was no longer listening.

Her eyes shone from behind her glasses like a beast stalking its prey.

“Excuse me!”

With that, she flew out of the classroom.

From the suit of the still-present Hashimoto, snot dripped onto a desk.

“Muwahahahahaa~...”

Yomiko stood before the entrance to the Library room.

No one had told her how to get here. By herself, she had made her way unerringly to this room.

So long as a given school had a library, Yomiko would be able to pinpoint that room’s location. The scent given off by the stacks of books called out to her.

With a single swift motion, she laid her cheek against the door.

“Within this very room...”

Burning excitement was beginning to creep into her voice and expression.

“Sumiregawa-sensei, is here...”

She rubbed her face affectionately up and down the door. As if she were a young girl in love, a pink blush spread across her cheeks.

“So--.... Ahem.”

Drawing herself up formally, she cleared her throat in preparation.

“Aaah--... I am a Cat. I am as of yet nameless...” (1)

She had striven in that declamation practice from the depths of her literary self.

“Please, excuse meee...”

Yomiko quietly opened the door and stepped into the room.

From where she stood, she could see the checkout counter; set a bit off to the side, tables and desks for reading; and at the heart of the room, a large number of bookcases arranged in parallel lines....

Since class was in session, there was no one in sight. Rays of sunlight spilled through the window to fill the calm air, nothing more.

It was a perfectly ordinary high school library.

“.....Yeaah--.....”

Yomiko basked to her heart’s content in the scent of the library.

Blended from an innumerable variety of paper, it was a deep and pleasant fragrance. That sort of air held a different flavor than that found in a bookstore.

“Hmmm~....Hm?”

While Yomiko was occupied with her olfactory sense, a sound flew to her ears.

Spun forth like a song, the surprisingly pleasant sound reoccurred at regular intervals. Much like a duet for the piano, it resembled an intricately tangled melody.

That sound originated from somewhere within the stacks.

More specifically, it had emitted from the hidden spot at the innermost part of the library, way on the other side of the stacks.

Yomiko walked unsteadily forward, drawn to the spot like a traveler lost in the woods to the sound of a fairy’s flute.

Perhaps from a lack of visitors, much of the contents of the shelves along the way were crowned with dust.

To complete the scene, little sunlight penetrated this far in, giving the stacks the appearance of a labyrinth’s walls.

It felt as if this place was cut off from the flow of time.

Of course, that could be said of any library.

With each step Yomiko took, the volume of the song steadily increased. In effect, it could be said that she was drawing ever closer to its performer.

There was no mistaking it. Around the corner of the bookcase before her the song was clearly audible.

Yomiko swallowed hard. Elation and nervousness intermingled within her body.

But right at that moment, the melody cut off abruptly.

“Eh--?”

After thoughtlessly shooting off her mouth, Yomiko rounded the corner of the stacks in a panic.

And there, was she.

Between the stacks there was a U-shaped table. (2) On its surface were piled

dozens of books, pages bristling with place-markers.

And, threaded somehow into the midst of all that, a total of four notebook computers had been placed. All of them seemed fully operational, and their various screens displayed open word processing programs.

This corner of the library had been transformed into a sort of private study.

The girl who was responsible for all this sat in the center. From behind, she appeared to have both hands raised as if begging heaven for some favor.

Her chestnut hair shot out backward energetically. That hairstyle was the same as in her author headshot.

"Sumi--....."

Yomiko directed her voice toward the girl's back.

"Sumiregawa, Sensei--!"

"....."

The girl's back answered her with silence.

"Sumiregawa, Sensei.....?"

Yomiko's statement took on a slight interrogative note.

"....."

The fingers of the girl's hands jerked slightly. The motion was minor enough that Yomiko failed to notice.

The air within the library began to change its character bit by bit. Until now, the atmosphere had been that of calm silence, but from the direction the girl at the table the temperature was dropping with alacrity.

Yomiko raised her voice slightly and threw it forth a third time.

"Sumiregawa, Nenene, Sensei~!"

"OOOohaaaargh~!"

The girl called Nenene stood stock upright, screaming at the top of her lungs. From the violence of her motion, the wheeled chair on which she had been sitting shot backward and fell to the floor.

Yomiko was taken by surprise and flinched away!

"Can't wrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiittte!"

Nenene, at quite a loss, grabbed her own head with both hands, and began to pull violently at her hair until it looked as if she'd had a bomb go off on her.

"Se.....Sensei?"

Having apparently heard her just now, Nenene spun around and spotted Yomiko for the first time.

"Uwha~....."

With the girl in that state, Yomiko unthinkingly produced *The Streetcorner where the Cats Live* from a pocket and began to compare her with the portrait within.

Her eyes were large and bloodshot, and her hair was in complete disarray. The upper button of her uniform was undone, but the impression that detail gave wasn't so much "sexy" as "dead tired". Her mouth didn't have the leisure to smile around the panting brought on by her overexcitement.

When matched up one by one the general features in the photo certainly seemed to match up with the real Nenene, but the impression she gave now was quite the opposite.

"You're Sumiregawa.....Nenene.....Sensei.....right?"

Yomiko timidly sputtered out her statement in cut-off chunks.

"Ohhhhhhh~!"

Letting loose a scream that could not be taken as denial or confirmation, Nenene

burst forward. As the space between them suddenly shrunk, a dumbstruck Yomiko tried to retreat.

“Medusea's sword! Faltz, who took the blame for Dorid, is gonna get beheaded! If he were you, what’d you do?!”

"Eh? Eh? Eh?"

Yomiko was steadily forced backward by Nenene's onslaught, until her back was pressed against the nearest bookcase.

While Nenene was more than half a head shorter than her target, the near-demonic force projected by Nenene's demeanor shot down any hope of opposition.

"You just went and killed your little sister! Whatcha gonna do? C'mon, whadda ya do?"

"... Is this about *Glendard’s Jesters?*"

The names that were spewing forth from Nenene’s mouth were those of characters from her recent fantasy novels. Of course, Yomiko was following the series.

"Wait a--... aaah!! Is Faltz is going to die?!

"You bet! Mildrowd's secret potion makes her go on a wild, sword-swinging rampage! Then Medusea kills her ass!"

"No! Please stop--! It'll take the fun out of reading it when it comes out!"

Yomiko covered her ears with her hands and shook her head in protest.

"You've never been apart since childhood! This little sister of yours, who's aaalllways been by your side, you killed her! Well, how about that--? How does that make you feel!"

"Lalala, I can't hear you! Laaa laaa laaa!"

Still covering her ears, Yomiko sank to the ground. For a tale that held such

promise, true satisfaction would only be derived from reading it for herself. Even when given by the original author herself, spoilers would never make her happy.

However, as Nenene noticed Yomiko's position, the look in her eyes began to change.

"..... That.... that's it!"

"Yes?"

"Medusea regrets what she did! Having slain her little sister, she loses herself in despair! She plugs up her ears and puts out her eyes, and throws herself down into a world of darkness and silence!"

Her voice was thick with excitement. Out of the scenarios she had considered before, she finally had made a breakthrough.

"Se--, Sensei--! So, who can defeat Valkes now! If Medusea's come to this!"

The main character having been lured into such a fix, even before the climax of the tale, had to be too major a problem to overcome.

Nenene sent Yomiko's concerns flying like a speck of dust in the wind.

"Not gonna think about that now!"

At that self-confident declaration, Yomiko's eyes grew round behind her glasses.

"Alllright! I can work with this!"

"Can you really say that, Sensei--?"

Suddenly, Nenene turned in place, sat back down in her chair, and poised her fingers over one of the notebook computers' keyboards. For some strange reason, a variety of said computers were scattered about.

"Huuh--"

She breathed a small sigh and in the next moment began banging violently away at the keys.

"Aaaargh~!"

Her fingers danced over the cramped keyboard. They leapt, they flew, they ran, faster than the eye could follow, spinning forth all manner of words onto the screen at an astonishing rate.

The sound she had heard before was that of these same keys being struck.

However, if it had sounded like a melody before, this was more like machine gun fire; that was the only match for this intensity and force.

"Whoa—..."

In the end, without having received verbal confirmation, Yomiko had to conclude that this could be no other than Nenene herself.

Though it certainly would not be fitting to describe her as physically imposing, her presence was a million-fold stronger. It was as menacing as an engine running at full blast.

That is to be expected of a writer in the midst of the fevered creative process.

As for Nenene, she completely failed to notice Yomiko's emotional outburst or anything else beyond herself as she continued to vigorously pound away at the keys.

Occasionally she slid along the desk, shuttling from notebook to notebook and working on four drafts at once. The reasoning behind this was impossible to discern.

Almost overcome with longing, Yomiko suddenly remembered her objective.

"Sumiregawa, Sensei~!"

How many times had she tried by now? She spoke up once more.

However, her voice was drowned out by the keystrokes that sounded through the quiet library.

"Sumiregawa, Sensei~!"

Drawing a bit closer, she raised her voice a notch. Even with that, the girl didn’t turn around.

“Sensei~, errr~!”

Yomiko stood right behind her target and moved her hand as if to grab the girl by the shoulder, and suddenly, Nenene turned toward her.

“Hiiyaaa~!”

A spectacular chop came swinging down toward Yomiko’s forehead.

“Urk.”

Taking the rapid blow right in the part of her hair, Yomiko staggered, albeit more from surprise than pain.

Nenene roared down at Yomiko, who was seemingly unable to rise from her position on the floor.

“Stay the hell out of my way~!”

“I, I’m sorry...”

Rubbing her forehead, Yomiko unthinkingly switched to a more formal style of kneeling. That rebuke had been enough to make her shrink back.

“..... Hmph~!”

From behind Nenene, who had relaunched her writing, Yomiko tentatively craned her neck in an attempt to glimpse the notebooks’ screen.

It would be awful to know how the story would end, but she was quite interested as to what Nenene was writing. The mindset of a fan is quite complex.

Though she was unaware of what Yomiko was up to behind her, Nenene rolled her chair in various directions while she continued to work on her drafts. It was almost as if she were trying to block Yomiko's view of the screens.

And from behind her, Yomiko was now moving the entire upper half of her body around as she tried to see those screens.

From a third party's perspective, this would have resembled basketball offense and defense.

Wordlessly, the two continued their opposed movements.

"Aaaand... Finiiiished!"

Sending her last draft off to the editing department via the net, Nenene gave vent to her joy.

She had somehow met today’s deadline for those four drafts.

She'd never before cut it so close with her schedule, but this time some sort of writer's block had taken up residence in her head.

..... To be honest with herself, it was probably be best for her to talk it over with someone.

Her will seemingly gone slack, she let loose a giant yawn. It was futile. Lately, she hadn't been getting anywhere near enough sleep, as her precious sleep time was continuously interrupted.

Looking at her wristwatch, she found it was already 4 in the afternoon.

Anyway, time to go home. Go home, and sleep, and think things over.

Nenene stood up from her chain and turned around.

"Whoooa~!"

Right there was Yomiko, still kneeling formally.

"Excellent work, Sumiregawa-sensei."

Thus said Yomiko, with a surprisingly unperturbed expression, to Nenene.

"... Who the hell are you?"

Apparently she hadn't made that much of an impression on Nenene's memory, as now the girl produced a suspicious expression.

"I'm Yomiko Readman."

"Riidoman?"

Nenene repeated back the foreign-sounding name.

"My father was English, my mother, Japanese, so I'm biracial, you see. Starting today, I'll be the substitute teacher for world history here."

"Teachin' world history? Abe-chan's... Ah, she on pregnancy leave?"

"Yes. I'm not nearly experienced enough, but please treat me well."

Yomiko pressed her hands to the floor and bowed deeply. (3)

"... If you're teachin' that class, what're you doing here?"

It looked as if she had indeed forgotten her last conversation with Yomiko. Perhaps she had been so intent on her deadline that her brain had been in a state of confusion.

"Yes--! That's just it!"

The tone of Yomiko's voice jumped up a level.

"The thing is, well! I, for you, Sumiregawa-sensei, may be of some measure of service."

In response to Yomiko's beaming expression, Nenene raised an eyebrow.

".... Just possibly, ‘sit you? The one who's been hasslin' me lately?"

"Huh?"

Nenene produced a single envelope from the midst of some documents that were scattered about and thrust it toward Yomiko.

It was a plain white envelope, with no distinguishing characteristics. No stamp, postmark, or even address had been recorded on it. Apparently someone would have needed to directly place it into the recipient’s mailbox.

After examining it closely, Yomiko emptied its contents into her hand and looked over the message within.

A single sheet of unruled paper had been inserted into the envelope.

At its center was but a single line of text.

"I'll be coming for you soon. To my Paul S"

The characters had been printed by a word processor. The letter gave away no meaning, no connection, no sense of the nature or personality of its author.

"What might this be?"

"Found it in my home mailbox yesterday. It was you, right?"

"No."

Yomiko shook her head politely as she answered.

Nenene made an even more disagreeable face.

"Happens a lot lately. Keep getting random phone calls where no one says anything, and when I leave the house, I feel like someone's tailing me. Thanks to all that, I just can’t get aaaannnny writing done!"

"Umm, might that be something about which you should notify the police...?"

"Already did! They just said 'We will step up our patrols,' and that's it! The hell kind of half-assed response's that! They're working for my taxes!"

As she spoke, Nenene began to pace around the room, spurred on by her rising emotions.

"And just to top it all off, this letter! First off, who the hell's Paul? I'm Nenene! Most people'd call me Sumiregawa Nenene!"

She punctuated her last comment with a jab of her thumb toward her chest. That action would normally come across as boastful, but it seemed strangely fitting to see Nenene do it. Wordlessly, it seemed to communicate the strong ego and self-esteem that lay within her.

"I know all about you. You debuted with *You Know Me* when you were just thirteen years old, and since then five million copies have been sold, making you the best-selling wunderkind of junior novel publishing world! Your favorite food is cheesecake, and when you take a bath, you wash your right leg first, right~!"

Yomiko's ardor was carried in her voice, which rose in pitch as she spoke.

"... You sure do know a lot about me, don't you."

"Yes~! I'm a big fan, you see!"

Smiling like a puppy who'd been praised by its master, Yomiko fished through her pockets and took out a copy of *The Streetcorner where the Cats Live*.

"I've alllways, alllways loved your books! When I read this one back in the day, I was so moved that my nose almost began to run!"

"... Try to make the flowing stuff tears next time."

Yomiko thrust the book straight toward the dubious-looking Nenene, without moving from her kneeling position.

"Well... I'm begging you! Please sign this! To receive your signature, it's been a dream of mine for ages!"

As she looked down at Yomiko, Nenene's gaze grew a bit colder.

"If you're such a big fan, you'd know that I don't sign stuff, right?"

It was true. Since her debut, she hadn't held a single signing event. For her class of novelist, that was quite unusual.

"Yes~! But with that sort of reputation, it makes me want it even more."

"God, you're annoying!"

"Pardon?"

Yomiko's voice was drowned out by the volume with which Nenene responded.

"You're a fan? I'm not an idol singer or some TV celebrity. I'm an author,

dammit. You read the stories I write and you’re moved; that should be enough. So why the hell, then, would you feel you gotta get a signature? A signature's just a name, you know."

"Huh? But, I meant..."

"I put every last bit of myself into my writing. Whatever fixation you have should be aimed not at me, but at my books."

For any popular author, sometimes particularly "excessive" fans would develop grandiose ideas and send letters or “presents”. When one becomes an author of Nenene's class, the ratio of such fans tends to skyrocket. This clearly wasn't the first time she'd had to deal with this.

"An author and a novel are Two. Separate. Things. If you start looking for more outside the book, you're just gonna confuse yourself!"

Yomiko choked out a response to Nenene's strong statement.

"...Is...that so..."

"Huh?"

Dropping her gaze, Yomiko stacked the books and the letter.

"I... I read your books, and I was truly moved. I wondered, what was she like, this teller of magnificent tales?"

"....."

At those unexpectedly heartfelt words, Nenene's burning spirit cooled a bit.

"I bet there are others who feel the same way, too. But you know, when you like someone, you want to learn more about them, right?"

"Like? Me? Even though you just met me?"

"Yes. Because even before that, I've read so very much of you."

Yomiko's statement lacked any hesitation. Her words were as guileless as those of a child.

"...And I just told you, that wasn’t me; those’re my books."

"One and the same. After all, didn't you say that you put your all into them?"

"....."

Yomiko began to flip gently through *The Streetcorner where the Cats Are*, her fingers moving the pages with obvious loving care.

"This paper tells me how very much you throw yourself into your writing."

With that, Yomiko turned her gaze directly onto Nenene, smiling unguardedly.

"I, truly, love you."

An awkward silence fell. Within statement lurked a small particle whose meaning that was as of yet something the two of them could not understand.

Having just been hit by a statement that could be interpreted as a confession of love, Nenene's expression shifted to one of simultaneous befuddlement and rage. Yomiko quietly picked up the letter again.

“For this person as well, surely it would be that way. So, if you’d just talk to him...”

However, Nenene flung the letter away from her, letting it flutter about until it came to rest on the floor between them.

“Ah...”

“You could say what you want, and this guy’d still get in my way.”

Nenene’s tone had returned to its previous state.

“But...”

“Furthermore,” she interrupted Yomiko before she could finish her statement, “thanks to this guy, I can’t sleep a wink. I’ve missed four deadlines, home and work both fail me(*), so I get stuck writing my manuscripts in the library. Got me?”

“Yes...”

“I don’t know what the hell he wants from me, but there is just one thing I want from him to stop goddamn harassing me! That’s all!”

For a second time, silence fell over the room; This time there was clearly something different about it...

“Readman-Sensei!”

The silence mingled with a third person’s voice.

From around the corner of the bookshelves, the figure of a jersey-clad male teacher appeared. It was Nire, the gym teacher.

“What are you doing-?! Your class-!”

As he said that, she came to her senses-- Yomiko had been sitting there in seiza for something close to seven hours, determined to wait until Nenene had finished her manuscript-- and, as one would expect, the history class she had been charged with overseeing had begun long ago. To have done this on her first day of substitute teaching showed a outstanding level of ineptitude.

“Aaah--...”

As you would expect, all the color drained from Yomiko’s face, “I--, I’m so sorry! I’ll head out straightaways...”

As Yomiko went to stand up, she pitched forward, falling to the ground painfully.

On account of having sat in seiza in place for so long, her feet had fallen entirely asleep.

His voice, laced with ice, fell coldly upon Yomiko from above

“Waaaaa~...”

Yomiko was mumbling and crying incomprehensibly while thrashing her upper

body about in a clearly distraught fashion.

"Sumiregawa-Sensei--!"

Having cleaned up the mess she had made of the library, Nenene tiredly approached the school's main gate, only to hear a voice call out to her.

She thought it was weird that she could tell who it was without turning around.

"Please wait, Sumiregawa-Sensei--!"

It was that woman from the library. That woman’s name was something like...Yomiko; that’s it. The name sounded like a joke, not that her own was the sort you’d usually hear used for a person.

Yomiko chased after Nenene, the wheeled bag she always dragged with her making a quiet clacking noise.

"I'm not even gonna bother lecturing you."

"... Yes. I apologize for worrying you like that."

Sighing to herself, Yomiko bowed sheepishly. It wasn't clear which was the teacher and which was the student.

"Couldn't say I was worried."

She'd meant it to sound cold, but a smiling, laughing Yomiko just gazed at her.

“...Well, What?!”

"Ummm, as for the next thing. I was thinking that I'd like to do a home visit.”

“A home visit--? To MYYY HOME--?!”

At Yomiko's sudden suggestion, Nenene's voice rose significantly.

"Yes"

"Why the--you're a substitute teacher, right?! It's not like you're my homeroom

teacher!"

"That may be true, but..."

At this point Yomiko glanced around as if checking the perimeter and then lowered her voice.

"Actually, I had thought to offer to protect you."

"Protect?"

"Yes. Umm, from the person who sent the letter."

"The hell? I'm good--'cuz tomorrow, I'm hiring a bodyguard."

For a high school girl like Nenene to be talking about bodyguards had a strange feeling to it.

"But even then, if he were to strike tonight or something, wouldn't that be pretty dangerous?"

"What I'm saying is, even if you were there, it's not like you'd have any goddamn impact."

"Sensei, I, I'm a bit stronger than I appear."

She thumped her chest with a fist. Unlike what she'd expected, it hit the top of her full bust, producing more of a "Poof" noise.

"....."

Speechless, Nenene reached her hands toward Yomiko's face.

"Yes?"

She grabbed both of Yomiko's cheeks and pulled and stretched them to the extreme left and right.

"Th--Thumirehawa, Thenthei--!"

"Woah. They reallllly stretch!" As they had managed to stretch twice as much as the average person's cheeks, even Nenene had to raise her voice in amazement.

"Thop, puwease--, thop...."

After toying with Yomiko for a bit, Nenene released her fingers. (1)

"Hi-hiiin..."

Her cheeks blazing red, Yomiko began to cry audibly, her tears just starting to pool in her eyes beneath her glasses.

"Wha-errrrre are you strong, damnit. You get your cheeks pinched and you're already half crying, aren't you."

"J-just now, I wasn't expecting that, you know~. That was just a cheap trick."

"Ah"

Nenene's gaze focused on something behind Yomiko's back.

"Eh?"

Without thinking, Yomiko turned around to look behind her.

"Tou”

Instantly, Nenene planted a light kick on Yomiko's unprotected back.

"Tawaba--!"

Yomiko fell quite magnificently, both hands raised as if cheering.

"You're just feel of fuzzy feelings, aren't you. To hell with protecting me; it's yourself you need to worry about. Maybe you should take a correspondence course in Aikido?"

Having picked herself up into a squatting position, Yomiko whimpered as she brushed dirt off of her face.

"....I just can't put forth my real power when it's not a serious situation."

A student on the way home spoke up toward these two in whom the power balance between teacher and student had been completely inverted.

"Whaaaaat, Sumiregawa. You're even puttin' on skits with the teach now?"

"Switchin' ta comedy? Gonna debut in the entertainment world?"

It was Nenene's classmates, Nori Kawarazaki and Harumi Mishima.

They were kidding around, but it felt like there was a speck of irony mixed in there somewhere, though it wasn't clear if that were intentional or not.

"It's just that this teacher up and started arguing with me! Me, I wanted to get home ASAP and sleep!"

"Such a HARD worker. For the two've us, next stop's the meetup.”

"Meetup?"

"Yep. Kitasawa and Nishi Middle's kids're getting along pretty well."

"Middle schoolers? Since when've you been into that sort of thing?"

"It's good and all, 'ccasionally. Even Sumiregawa might do something other than work on her novel all the time, maybe have a little fun. "

"Yeah, yeah. You'll get left behind. With the cool stuff."

"Hooow 'bout speaking to some of the kids who're fans of yours?"

"Nope, no way. Sumiregawa's fans're usually female, right."

"Bit weird, but that way there'd be new stuff to explore..."

Glancing at her face, the two burst into laughter. But as for the one in question, her face displayed neither amusement nor anger, but serenity.

"Umm..."

Beating the dirt out of her coat, Yomiko stood up.

"This meetup thing sounds like fun to me, but."

"Yes?"

To have Yomiko, who almost didn't register with those two as a human being, let alone as a teacher, suddenly involve herself in their conversation was quite unexpected.

"You could also try reading some books; how about that?"

"Books? The questioning looks on the two showed they clearly didn't know what she is getting at.

"Yes."

Yomiko pulled a single volume from within her coat. It was a young adult novel.

"There's this one, Radio Girl. It's light and interesting. It talks about a boy that falls in love with a female listener that sends postcards in which are read during a late-night broadcast…."

Her explanation appeared to have no end, as she produced out book after book with flourishes worthy of a magician.

"... Ah, and then, there's Please Return My Kiss. The main character is a girl who's searching for the boy who'd been her first kiss back in their childhood. The only clue she has is an old photo of the two of them, but there's a surprising twist in the end..."

The two female students exchanged glances as Yomiko's explanation flowed in one ear and out the other, the specter of the morning exercises returning to life in their imaginations.

"...But well, when it comes to YA novels, I've really just got to recommend Sumiregawa-sensei's debut work, You Know Me."

"!"

As her own book was brought up, Nenene stiffened up slightly.

"Ah, but if you're friends, you've probably read it already..."

"Knock it off--!"

It was Yomiko's turn to stiffen up, as Nenene's shout made her accidentally drop the book.

"....Eh?"

The air stopped dead, but only between the two of them.

As for the two female students, this was the chance they had been looking for.

"Aahh.....We've got to get going, so....."

"See ya later, Sumiregawa"

Quite in contrast to how they had strolled up before, they began to walk rapidly away.

Subsequently, Nenene and Yomiko were all who remained.

"Sumiregawa, Sensei.....?"

"It's embarassing, don't ya think--! Don't whip out my book in front of people--!"

"I'm sorry.... But....."

"But what--!"

"..... If you go into any bookstore, there'd be tons of your books around."

"A bookstore's alright--! I just hate it when that gets pulled in front of people I know!"

Despite the threatening aura that was pressing down upon her, Yomiko just had to inquire further.

".....Why would that be?"

"....."

Without answering, Nenene turned around and began to walk away.

".....Umm, Sensei....."

Suitcase clattering behind her, Yomiko chased after the fleeing target's back.

"Don't you follow me--! Go home--!"

"Buuut..."

"Haaah..... So this is Sensei's apartment?"

Yomiko peered upward at the high-class apartment building as it towered before her, her voice tinged with awe at the sight.

"Man, you're really bold, seriously."

In the end, Yomiko hadn't even considered leaving Nenene alone.

Nenene had hailed a taxi and headed off, but Yomiko, suitcase clattering along as she dragged it behind her, raised a loud "Seeeeeeenseeeeei" before seeming to give up. The taxi driver also assumed that it wouldn't be hard to drive away from the women, her hair dishelved and her coat flying around her as she ran.

As for Nenene, not once did she see Yomiko's reflection fall behind in the rear-view mirror, with not the slightest sign of her abandoning pursuit. It felt as if she'd gotten a meddlesome cousin.

Grumbling all the while, Nenene opened a keypad installed at the first floor entrance. After she pressed the numbered keys to enter her code, the noise signalling that the door to enter the floor had opened could be heard.

"Yeah, yeah, here's where we say goodbye. I gotta sleep now, you know~"

Waving a half-hearted goodbye, Nenene went to enter the doorway.

".....Sensei, ummmm..."

"What."

Yomiko pointed toward the postboxes lined up in a row nearby. They were obviously intended for use by the residents of the apartment building. Apparently, with her overabundance of exhaustion Nenene had forgetten to check her mail.

As the number of slots that would fit in the space were limited, the numbers didn't go beyond 100. In their midst Nenene's was conspicuous enough to be obvious for Yomiko, who was visiting for the first time, to pick it out at a glance. It's not that it bore any decoration.

Notes[edit]

1: The line she's quoting here is the very first bit of Natsume Souseki's classic novel *I am a Cat*.

2: Originally was this kanji, not U:

3: Technically three fingers of each hand, like this.